

Livingston Apprentice Brings Home National Award

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Each year, more than 10,000 electrical apprentices from across the nation apply for the coveted Independent Electrical Contractors Wire-Off award. After a series of state and regional competitions those 10,000 are whittled down to 20 who will move forward to the national contest in Denver. This year, thirty four year old Neal Lamke of Livingston was one of those twenty.



Lamke's journey to the top of his profession was like that of many Montana high school graduates trying to find their place in the world of work. After graduating from Bozeman Senior High, he drove a freight truck, dabbled in restaurant work and put in a stint at a local saw mill. By age 30, he knew he needed a better future for himself. His inspiration wasn't that far away; in fact all he had to do was pick up the phone and

call his father. Al Lamke, a retired 25- year state electrical inspector, shared with his son the specifics of an apprenticeship program.

Neal Lamke began his electrical apprenticeship with Burke Electric, then moved on to Young's Electric, and finally settled in with his current employer, Tech Electric of Livingston. Lamke attended classes taught by the Treasure State Independent Electrical Contractors (IEC) Chapter in Bozeman during his training period with Tech Electric. "The training I received was top-notch," said Lamke. "The best part was that my employer, Tech Electric, paid for all my training plus paid me a darn good wage while I was learning the trade. That's what's so neat about serving an apprenticeship – you earn while you learn!"

Lamke was finishing up the final year of his training when the head of the Treasure State IEC came to his class and asked if any of the students were interested in the 2006 national wire-off contest. Lamke, competitive by nature, who finds relaxation in hunting bears with a handgun, immediately decided to try out. Tech Electric was so invested in Lamke's success they not only encouraged him to enter the contest, they paid all of his trip expenses to Denver.

During one of the most critical parts of the contest, as Lamke was assembling a circuit diagram and bending conduit, he glanced out into the audience and, much to his surprise, saw his mom and dad, who had flown in unannounced from their home in Hawaii. “No added pressure there!,” he recalls.

Last year’s second place winner, Travis Thrums of Christie Electric, Bozeman, can attest to the skills required for the competition. The competition is a tough two days, packed with written tests, practical problem solving challenges, and wiring local and remote stations for a hydraulic process.



Lamke’s employer knew that he had the potential and was willing to make the investment in him. According to Ray Richards, Tech Electric Shop Manager, it’s the highest honor that apprentices can attain.

“The apprenticeship program, the IEC and Tech Electric have made it possible for me to become a highly-skilled craftsman and for that, I’m extremely grateful,” said Lamke upon receiving the \$3,000 award and \$1,000 worth of tools. “For now, I have no desire to open my own electrical business but, I am considering accepting an invitation to instruct in the Bozeman area IEC program. It’s a small way to give back for the wonderful opportunities I’ve received.”